Adaptation of Existing NSF-Funded REU Programs to Include Astrobiology Undergraduate Research

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Over the past two summers, the NAI Team at the Graduate School of Oceanography, University of Rhode Island (GSO/URI) has introduced talented undergraduates from across the nation to the burgeoning field of astrobiology. Students interested in conducting astrobiology research are provided with financial support and mentoring which supports their participation in an existing NSF-funded Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program in oceanography at GSO/URI. Since the fields of oceanography and astrobiology are both highly interdisciplinary and use similar research methodologies, surprisingly few modifications to the infrastructure of the existing REU program are required to accommodate the NAI students. The primary change has been the inclusion of astrobiology material in introductory lectures. In addition, members of the NAI Team have provided topical lectures in astrobiology to the entire cohort of REU participants. The obvious benefits of incorporating the NAI students into the existing REU program include: 1) student exposure to the topic, by providing NAI students with first-hand experience in astrobiology research, and 2) cost savings, by utilizing the existing infrastructure of the REU program for recruitment and training. A more subtle benefit is the broader exposure of astrobiology to the entire REU cohort. NAI students are also encouraged to present their work to their professors and fellow students back at their home institution, and thus, providing even broader exposure for the field.